

# THE COMPETENCY OF COUNSELLORS AT DIVERSE WORK SETTINGS IN MANAGING MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES IN MALAYSIA

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## **Abstract**

Multicultural counselling literature and research have highlighted the need for practising counsellors around the globe to be multiculturally competent. However, in Malaysia, such competencies were not yet formulated for use. This shows that multicultural counselling is still in its developing stage in the practice and training of counsellors in Malaysia. Although multicultural counselling courses have been introduced and taught in the counsellor education programs in most Malaysian universities and colleges since the 1990s, there is no information regarding its effectiveness to enhance the practice of multicultural counselling among professional counsellors at diverse work settings in Malaysia. This paper explores relevant literature and research findings to discuss the status and extent of multicultural counselling competency of counsellors who are working at diverse work settings in Malaysia. The paper argues two things: (1) The need for counsellors to be multiculturally competent and incorporate these competencies in their counselling practice at diverse work settings, and (2) The need for counsellors to upgrade their mental health literacy from both etic and emic perspectives. The paper also discusses some examples of culturally sensitive issues that were considered as challenging cases by Malaysian counsellors during counselling sessions. The paper concludes by presenting some strategies and tips in enhancing counsellors' multicultural counselling competency in managing mental health issues at diverse work settings in Malaysia.

## **Keywords:**

Multicultural Counselling Competency  
Mental Health Literacy  
Professional Counsellors  
Mental Health Issues  
Malaysian Counselling Profession

## **Introduction**

Scholars from different disciplines have agreed that culture and context are important influences on human lives. For example, the importance of culture in counselling is clearly visible because counselling occurs in a cultural context, appropriate assessment of a client's problems should take into consideration the clients' culture, counselling itself is culturally based, and/or culture itself may be the focus of counselling (Lee, et al., 2007). In the Malaysian counselling profession, both the culture and context become great influences on the understanding and practice of counselling among counsellors in various work settings (Rafidah, 2011). This paper invites readers to think globally about counselling at multicultural contexts but at the same time promotes local practices that are culturally competent and meet the needs of local clients.

Malaysia is a multicultural context, especially in term of ethnicity and religion. Malaysian population comprises four major ethnic groups and more than 50 ethnic minorities. With a total population of about 28.3 million, Malaysia consists of 67.4% Malays and indigenous groups, 24.6% Chinese, 7.3% Indians, and 0.7% Others (Malaysian Department of Statistics,



2010). The professed religion among Malaysians are diverse: Islam (61.3%), Buddhism (19.8%), Christianity (19.8%), Hinduism (6.3%), Confucianism, Taoism and other traditional Chinese religion (1.3%) and others (0.4%). The culture and diversity of Malaysian population contribute to the current national movement towards "One Malaysia", which emphasises on national unity by encouraging mutual respect and trust among the different races in Malaysia. This national movement has highlighted the need to increase Malaysian counsellors' awareness and understanding regarding diversity and multicultural issues in the Malaysian context. However, the status and extent of Malaysian counsellors' competencies in counselling when dealing with diversity and multicultural issues are yet to be determined.

This paper aims to explore relevant literature and research findings to identify the key competencies needed by professional counsellors when working with culturally diverse clients in multicultural contexts. In particular, the paper seeks to address the following objectives:

1. To discuss multicultural counselling competency (MCC)
2. To identify the status and extent of MCCs among professional counsellors in Malaysia
3. To identify mental health issues that are considered as culturally sensitive and complex in the specific cultural context of Malaysia
4. To propose some strategies and tips to better handle these issues at diverse work settings in Malaysia

It is hoped that by sharing this literature review and some relevant research findings on the topic, counsellors who are working at diverse work settings can improve their understanding and practice of counselling when handling mental health issues at their respective contexts.

### **Understanding Multicultural Counselling Competency**

Multicultural counselling literature suggests that in order for counsellors to work effectively with diverse clients, they have to develop multicultural counselling competencies (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992; Sue & Torino, 2005; Whaley, 2008). Sue et al. (1992) proposed a 3(characteristics) x 3 (dimensions) model of MCC. The three core dimensions of MCC are (a) *beliefs* and *attitudes* regarding racial and ethnic minorities, the need to check biases and stereotypes, and the development of a positive orientation towards multiculturalism; (b) *knowledge* of one's own worldview, knowledge of cultural groups with whom one works, and knowledge of socio-political influences on members of these groups; and (c) *skills*, strategies and interventions needed to work with minority groups within a cross-cultural counselling context. According to the model, a culturally skilled counsellor is one (1) who is actively in the process of becoming **aware** of his or her own assumptions about human behaviour, values, biases, preconceived notions, personal limitations and so forth, (2) who actively attempts to **understand** the worldviews of his or her culturally different client without negative judgments, and (3) who is in the process of actively developing and practicing appropriate, relevant and **sensitive intervention strategies** and **skills** in working with his or her culturally different clients. The model produces a set of 31 detailed criteria or standards for judging the quality of multicultural competence (refer to Sue et al.'s (1992) for detail). Such standards have been formally endorsed by the American Counselling Association (ACA) and the American Psychological Association (APA). Numerous MCC concepts have also been infused into the 2005 ACA Code of Ethics to highlight the importance of becoming a multiculturally competent counselling professional in today's globalised world (D'Andrea & Heckman, 2008a; Pack-Brown, Thomas, & Seymour, 2008).



In line with the national movement and to be at par with professional counsellors in a globalised world, Malaysian counsellors are expected to be multiculturally competent. They also have ethical-legal responsibility in their practice with diverse Malaysian clients. Malaysian counsellors must conform to the ethical guidelines stated in the Code of Ethics published by MBC or locally known as Lembaga Kaunselor Malaysia (LKM, 2011). At the same time, Malaysian professionals who claim themselves as counsellors and provide counselling services to the general public must abide to the rules and regulations stated in the Counsellors' Act 580 (Akta Kaunselor, 1998). The high expectations and ethical-legal responsibility imposed upon them, require them to develop relevant competencies to be able to work effectively with diverse clients at various work settings such as schools, colleges and universities, hospitals, government agencies, and other contexts.

**Profiling Malaysian Counsellors' MCCs at Diverse Work Settings**

A national survey on Malaysian counsellors' perceived MCCs revealed some important findings that can shed some light on the status and extent of professional counsellors' competency at diverse work settings (Rafidah, 2011). A review of findings from local studies (Rafidah, 2011, 2013, 2016) is presented below.

**Training Needs**

A doctoral study reported the training needs of Malaysian counsellors based on a multicultural case vignette involving an elderly client who come from culturally marginalised group (Rafidah, 2011). Overall, when asked about their training needs based on a 5-point Likert scale (1- Definitely Don't Need → 5- Definitely Need), the survey participants gave high ratings to the five types of training (Training on general counselling competencies; Training on MCCs; Training on culture or cultural diversity; Upskills training on counselling skills and techniques; Any training related to the process of counselling) with an average score of 4.26 (SD=.78). However, the top three trainings that participants scored highest were training on MCCs (M=4.52, SD=.76), training on culture or cultural diversity (M=4.45, SD=.77), and upskills training on counselling skills and techniques (M=4.29, SD=.89), indicating that these areas were highly needed for their professional development training.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Participants' Training Needs

	N	Min	Max	M	SD
1. Training on general counselling competencies	468	1	5	3.87	1.22
2. Training on MCCs	484	1	5	4.52	.76
3. Training on culture or cultural diversity	477	1	5	4.45	.77
4. Upskills training on counselling skills and techniques	466	1	5	4.29	.89
5. Any training related to the process of counselling.	471	1	5	4.14	.99
Valid N (listwise)	447				

The majority of them reported that such types of training were highly needed, in order to:



1. become more multiculturally competent counsellors (e.g., [English-translated] *to gain current knowledge, information, theories, skills and techniques in order to help me become more competent in multicultural counselling; Any form of training is beneficial to a practitioner as it not only is a refresher but also may provide insight into new knowledge/skills not known to practitioner; and counsellors need to be aware and understand the sensitiveness of cultural influences on clients. This training will help counsellors in giving more effective counselling session[s]*);
2. provide better quality, more effective, professional and culturally-sensitive services (e.g., [English-translated] *Enhancing professionalism from time to time can strengthen the services that we provide; ...if training such as a continuous personal and professional development can be made available, it would be good for counsellors to upgrade the quality of their counselling services to become more professional; and "to update skills and competency in multicultural counselling so that the best possible service can be delivered to clients who come from different race and ethnicity"*); and
3. upgrade the status of Malaysian counselling profession (e.g., *"My basic counselling skills are sufficient, but I need training in multicultural counselling to strengthen my profession[alism]"*; *Any training and exposure related to enhancing the competency and skills of counselling are needed on a continuous basis to strengthen and upgrade counselling towards becoming a quality service, especially in Malaysia"*).

Both quantitative and qualitative findings from the survey highlight the need for counsellors to become more multiculturally competent in their practice with diverse clients.

### Counsellors' Perceived Multicultural Counselling Competencies

In the national survey on perceived MCCs (Rafidah, 2011), descriptive statistics using means and standard deviations were used to determine the extent of counsellors' self-reported MCC based on the five extracted dimensions of MCC. Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations of each extracted factors or dimensions.

Table 2

Factor Correlations and Factor Alpha Coefficients for the MCCS-MCE Scale (N=508)

5-Factor Solution	Min	Max	*M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Multicultural understanding (n=7)	1.86	5.00	3.85	.55	(.85)				
2. Multicultural knowledge (n=7)	1.00	5.00	3.86	.63	.08	(.76)			
3. Multicultural skills (n=4)	1.00	5.00	3.11	.80	.21	-.04	(.86)		
4. Multicultural Awareness (n=6)	1.33	5.00	3.36	.56	.02	.24	-.04	(.52)	
5. Cross-cultural skills (n=3)	1.00	5.00	3.75	.63	.35	-.04	.23	-.05	(.85)
Total scale (n=27)	2.27	4.81	3.55	.34					(.75)

\*. Range 1.00 to 5.00.

Note: Reliability estimates appear in the parentheses on the diagonal

The mean ratings of competence for each factor were mostly between 3 (moderately competent) to 4 (competent). Overall, the participants perceived themselves as multiculturally competent ( $M=3.55$ ,  $SD=.34$ ). They perceived themselves to be most competent on the Multicultural Knowledge ( $M=3.86$ ,  $SD=.63$ ) and Multicultural Understanding ( $M=3.85$ ,  $SD=.55$ ) dimensions. In contrast, they perceived themselves to be the least competent on the Multicultural Skills ( $M=3.11$ ,  $SD=.80$ ) and Multicultural Awareness ( $M=3.36$ ,  $SD=.56$ )



dimensions. This indicates the competencies of Malaysian counsellors are predominantly on the “knowing what” aspect and lacking the “knowing how” component.

In order to work effectively with culturally diverse clients who may have culturally complex mental health issues, professional counsellors must master all the three components of MCC, the multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills. This finding indicates the need for Malaysian counsellors to engage in professional development training activities (e.g., seminars and workshops) on a continuous basis to enhance their multicultural competence. This will help them to continuously upgrade their existing knowledge and skills pertaining to multicultural issues in Malaysia, and hence becoming more multiculturally competent professionals. Therefore, the Malaysian counselling profession should be vigilant about providing practising counsellors with ongoing educational and professional support on relevant diversity and multicultural topics. For example, providing training opportunities related to counselling ethnic minority or specialised client groups (e.g., gays, lesbians, elderly and disabled persons) would enhance Malaysian counsellors’ multicultural awareness and multicultural skills.

### **Preparedness and Confidence Level**

The aspect of competency is strongly related to the counsellors’ preparedness and confidence level. When Malaysian counsellors were asked regarding their preparedness and confidence level when dealing with multicultural case experienced by culturally different clients, the majority (68.9%) explained and justified their preparedness and confidence based on their perceived practice capabilities, which are a result of their multicultural knowledge, skills, past experience, awareness, and basic qualities as a counsellor. However, it appears that those who reported less preparedness and confidence in handling multicultural cases were mostly school counsellors because their justifications include their limited clientele (i.e., school students and Malays), concerns for significant age differences, and less diversity in counselling practice. This finding shows that counsellors at diverse work settings must be equipped with MCCs before counselling clients from different cultural backgrounds.

Malaysian counsellors are encouraged to actively seek practice opportunities with culturally diverse clients, especially those who come from specialised client groups such as gays, lesbians, elderly people, disabled and men, because counselling these groups received the lowest MCC mean ratings. So, actively doing volunteering work at various government or non-government organisations would be helpful, especially for those semi-practising counsellors such as counselling lecturers and administrators, to enhance their multicultural practice experiences with diverse clientele and issues because the nature of their work overlooks the importance of continuous clinical practices.

### **Culturally Complex Mental Health Issues**

Some counselling problems presented during counselling at diverse work settings relate to different norms and values than those upheld by most Malaysians. Issues such as gay or lesbian lifestyles, pre-marital or extra-marital sex are generally perceived as culturally sensitive because these violate the cultural norms and values of general Malaysians. Hence, counselling clients with such issues poses some challenges to Malaysian professional counsellors. Other culturally sensitive and complex problems/issues that may affect Malaysian clients’ mental health are presented below (Rafidah, 2013):



Table 3

No	Counselling Cases (Mental Health Issues)	Work Setting
1	Extra-marital sex	Community (Welfare Department)
2	Suicidal	Schools
3	Child abuse	Community (Welfare Department)
4	Domestic violence	Community (Welfare Department)
5	Child trauma/distress	Community (Welfare Department)
6	Depression in women (e.g., menopause, loss of loved ones)	Hospital
7	Drug addiction	School
8	Inter-racial marriage	Armed Force Unit
9	Supernatural phenomenon	Non-Government Organisation (NGO)
10	Pre-marital sex and pregnancy among teenagers	Shelter Homes
11	Social/Juvenile problems (e.g., pornography)	Schools

For example, a male Chinese-Muslim counsellor, who had experience counselling a male Malay-Muslim client with multiple issues (gay relationship, marital problems, self-esteem and family issues), indicated that his case was complex because:

...it involves of course religious values, it involves also sexuality issue, and it also involves family issues there whereby he's got problems with his siblings as well. He's the youngest. The only child, the only person in the family who did not go to the university. So, self-esteem issues also came in. So, it's quite complicated in that sense.

So, when the presenting problem(s) involved an intersection of culturally sensitive issues related to ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and family relationship, the case may be perceived as most challenging by these Malaysian counsellors, especially when it violates the cultural norms and values of Malaysians.

The finding clearly highlights the need for Malaysian counsellors to upgrade their mental health literacy on a continuous basis. The term **mental health literacy** was first introduced in 1997 and defined as: knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders which aid their recognition, management and prevention" (Jorm, Korten, Jacomb, Christensen, Rodgers, & Pollitt, 1997). This definition opens up many doors for people in the helping professions, beside the psychiatrists and medical doctors, to contribute in mental health area. Thus, emphasis should be given to related areas and disciplines such as counselling and psychotherapy; and professionals such as counsellors need to be continuously trained in order to gain the necessary insight in mental health issues/disorders experienced by today's society.

If counsellors really want to contribute to the society's well-being, they need to improve their mental health literacy. If not, they may cause some delays in recognition and help-offering, hinder public acceptance and confidence in their credibility in mental health care, and cause people with mental disorder to be denied of affective self-help and appropriate support from others in the community. Therefore, it is the purpose of this research to help counsellors and future counsellors to explore their current knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders and to improve them if it does not up to the standard.



## Strategies and Tips in Enhancing MCC at Diverse Work Settings

Although Malaysian counsellors reported many challenges and difficulties they encountered when counselling culturally different clients (Rafidah, 2013), they also shared some useful strategies to deal with those challenges. For example, besides developing multicultural competencies, it was recommended that counsellors should:

1. continue to learn and practice multicultural counselling (e.g., [English-translated] *need continuous learning and practice*),
2. use simple but effective communication skills (e.g., *The main challenge has been language barriers. However, somehow, non verbal communication helps a lot in such cases; the difficulty perhaps is a technical one - communicating with Chinese speaking clients. We have to converse in very simple BM (i.e., Malay)), such as using a translator if necessary (e.g., [English-translated] Difficulty in terms of language. I have to make sure that my language can be understood by my clients. Sometimes, I have to ask my colleague who is ethnically matched with the client to act as a translator*), and
3. always strive for professionalism in practice (e.g., [English-translated] *normally, I can handle any difficulties. If not, I always ask clients to explain to me until I fully understand the issue*).

When asked for their recommendations to help other counsellors to becoming a multiculturally competent counsellor, their responses were compiled and are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Tips and Strategies Recommended by Interview Participants for Full-Practising, Semi-Practising Counsellors, and Counsellor Trainees.

Group	Tips and recommendations
Full-practising counsellors	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Seek continuous consultation and supervision (Cheng and Kasmah)</li> <li>2. Continuously participate in seminars, workshop, or conference on multicultural counselling training</li> <li>3. Read continuously</li> <li>4. Volunteer for any counselling-related work/jobs (Cheng, Elaine, Rogayah)</li> <li>5. Reflect constructively and continuously on past and current practices</li> <li>6. Listen to people's talks (via YouTube or face-to-face) (Fred)</li> <li>7. Conduct mini-research (Dharma and Fred)</li> <li>8. Share practice experiences with others in a semi-formal discussion (round table) - peers consultation (Dharma).</li> <li>9. Carefully select and use culturally appropriate terms during counselling, avoid using terms like 'diagnosis' or 'treatment' as if you are talking to a sick person because such terms can make your clients sicker (Fred).</li> <li>10. Master basic principles of counselling and basic qualities of a good counsellor.(Ali, Cheng, Dharma, Elaine, Fred, Rogayah, Hidayah)</li> <li>11. Develop your basic qualities and skills to suit your work culture and clientele market.(Hidayah and Dharma)</li> </ol>
Semi-practising counsellors	<p><u>For counsellor administrators</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>12. Know your priorities first: Are you a counsellor or an administrator?</li> <li>13. Focus on helping/counselling clients rather than trying to administrate them - refresh back your basic principles of counselling</li> <li>14. Take time to practice because sooner or later, your knowledge and skills</li> </ol>



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will be gone; (Fred)

For counsellor educators

15. Screen potential counselling students properly - First, use psychological testing such as personality, interest, and careers to get the right candidates to be future counsellors. Then, proceed with a panel interview with the shortlisted ones.(Ali and Hidayah)
16. Take time to practice because sooner or later, your knowledge and skills will be gone; (Fred)
17. Use innovative and creative ways of teaching so that trainees feel empowered and confidence to move forward and self-explore their strengths and weaknesses, esp. in role-play, (Fred and Rogayah)
18. Don't simply criticise but provide 'constructive feedback' by highlighting the strengths rather than focusing on the weaknesses;(Fred)
19. Let students take turns to be clients and counsellors so that they know the difference experiences and appreciate one another;(Fred)
20. Invite other students or audience to give positive comments and never allow them to provide negative comments.(Fred)
21. Don't simply give your negative comments but try to discuss each one of the negative comments by proposing some strategies to deal with it;(Fred)
22. Always praise your trainee's achievement no matter how small it is. Remember! It takes time to master even the basic skills of counselling.(Fred)
23. Carefully select assignment topics (with a multicultural focus) and carefully assign study group membership to achieve cultural heterogeneity.(Ali)
24. Carefully impose conditions to allow for culturally-mixed groups of students (Ali)
25. Carefully implement culturally-sensitive strategies to teach 'sensitive topics' such as discrimination or stereotype.(Rogayah)
26. Teach and guide the students to be culturally sensitive with their clients, e.g., don't simply extend your hand if you meet your female-Muslim clients unless they are culture-matched.(Rogayah)
27. Promote cultural visits to understand prospective clients' way of life - first-hand experience and invite them to reflect and learn from those experiences by writing a report.(Rogayah)

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Counsellor  
trainees

28. Develop basic interests and qualities to be a good counsellor
29. Socialise with diverse people regardless of cultures
30. Always seek opportunities to practise counselling with culturally diverse clients.
31. Active listening inside and outside counselling context: "Sometimes, when we listen to people's talking, you understand better than reading you know. Listen to people talking is one way of the good thing." (Fred, Interview 6, p.18)
32. Keep a personal diary or journal (i.e., something like a log book) to record your counselling activities and your thoughts or impression after the activities.

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Source: Rafidah Aga Mohd Jaladin (2011). Professional counsellors' understanding and practice of multicultural counselling in Malaysia. Doctoral Thesis. Melbourne, VIC: Monash University.

Indeed, these tips and recommendations are very useful in enhancing counsellors' competencies especially when working with culturally diverse clients at various work settings.



To better educate and train counsellors to become multiculturally competent practitioners in the field of multicultural counselling, the findings suggest several potential implications. First, the findings seem to suggest that the counsellor education and training programs should place more emphasis on both the theoretical and practical components of counselling in the curriculum. By doing this, Malaysian policy makers would not only address the comments made by some participant counsellors in this study (e.g., *To understand is too easy, just put in the words; but to practise it, I think it is not easy as understanding*) but they would show their understanding regarding the importance of both theory and practice in the educational and professional objectives of counsellor education programs. Second, the teaching and learning process should place more emphasis on the multicultural competencies components of the counsellor education and training programs.

Lastly, the way that multicultural counselling courses are developed and taught must focus on all the dimensions of MCC revealed in this paper. So, course coordinators and counsellor educators should include training in the curriculum that focuses on all the core components of MCC (multicultural understanding, knowledge, skills, awareness, and cross-cultural skills) when they develop multicultural counselling courses at their respective faculties/universities. In particular, they should place more emphasis on issues pertaining to multicultural awareness (beliefs and attitudes) and multicultural skills because these dimensions received the lowest MCC mean ratings. Overall, it is timely for the Malaysian counselling profession to impose a requirement for all institutions that offers counsellor education programs to consistently review their existing programs and courses in order to keep abreast with the current thinking and development in the multicultural counselling field.

## Conclusion

Two conclusions can be drawn from this paper. Firstly, it has provided important information regarding the nature and extent of MCCs among professional counsellors in Malaysia. Secondly, this paper has shown that Malaysian counsellors generally perceived themselves to be multiculturally competent [ $M=3.55$ ,  $SD=.33$ ; range: 1 (least competent) to 5 (most competent)]. They perceived themselves to be most competent on the knowledge dimension and the least competent on the skills dimension. This calls for immediate action from policy makers, practitioners, counsellor educators (the faculty) and trainee counsellors to:

1. Formulate specific MCC standards to guide the practice of counselling with a culturally diverse population;
2. Upgrade their mental health knowledge and skills through participation in seminars, workshops, or short course on culture and diversity;
3. Infuse multicultural principles in counselling curriculum, across diverse courses and various levels of practicum or training;
4. Seek opportunities to practise counselling with culturally different clients, especially those who come from specialised client populations such as gays, lesbians, and elderly people to improve multicultural skills; and
5. Reflect continuously on their practices and lived experiences to identify the strengths and limitations regarding multicultural counselling understanding and practices at their respective work settings.

Indeed, to be at par with the international standards, Malaysian counsellors must always strive to think globally but act locally to suit the mental health needs of culturally diverse clients at their respective work settings.



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